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AUTHOR Tee, Ernie
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ABSTRACT

Music videos from the past few years have become a prominent phenomenon in our culture. They are critically compared by a small or large section of the public with the structures of, and relations within, social reality. These videos are considered to portray real situations that are, according to the standards of western culture, severely condemned, based on an attitude that sees a direct link between the events of daily reality and their depiction in the music video. However, the critical questions really are the extent to which the images of music videos have the power to make a representation, have any relationships with the events of reality, or have the ability to portray these events. The analysis and reception of music videos present a paradox, i.e., the video image and its "reality effect" versus music videos, which are concerned with the manipulation, transformation, and reversing of the analogous image, using refined animation and computer techniques to efface the boundaries and separations used in films and television. In formulating a criticism of music videos, new approaches should be used that are adapted to the videos as the objects of analysis; music videos challenge the critic to forget reality altogether and to eliminate every representative activity which should refer to it. (17 references) (CGD)

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Ernie Tee

Music Videos: on Reality and Representation

Paper presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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There is a music video of a Dutch pop group, The Golden Earring, with one of their latest hit singles, When the lady smiles. This video, made by the director of a succesful Dutch feature film The Elevator, Dick Maas, caused some sensation when it was broadcast. The video shows a man in the underground who is rather obsessed by a 'lady's smile'. Finally he lays violent hands on one of the female passengers, a nun, whose upper clothes are ripped off so that one gets a sudden view of her red bra. All this material cut to the rumbling rhythm of the music of the Golden Earring. The outcry among the public, or at least part of the public, was not only caused by the fact that the man was attacking a nun, but also by the suggestion made in the video, that nuns might wear this kind of showy underclothing. That was impossible, inauthentic, were the reactions.

The video makers of When the lady smiles were forced by some Dutch broadcasting companies, who refused to show the video in their music programs, to deliver another, expurgated version. This hardly seemed to be a problem (and that is characteristic for the quite wild and arbitrary structure of music videos): the one-and-a-half seconds in which the man touched the nun were simply cut and replaced by a freeze image of her frightened face. The same was done with another violent action of the man towards a different woman in the cabin of an elevator (a 'quote' from the film The Elevator, like John Landis was triumphantly quoting his own film An American Werewolf in London in Michael Jacksons video Thriller). In this way the video of The Golden Earring was made presentable and the song became a smash hit.

One can think of other examples of music videos from the past few years in which they have become a prominent phenomenon in our

culture, which are critically compared, by a small or large section of the public, with the structures of and relations within social reality. These videos are considered to portray real situations that are, according to the standards of our (western) culture, severely condemned. When also the videos are condemned, this is clearly based on an attitude of mind that sees a direct link between the events of our daily reality and their depiction in the music videos. It is a view informed by a neutral transparency of the video-image, by a co-ordination of relations and structures from reality and relations and structures in the videos, and finally by the power of the video-image to represent and evoke reality directly, and to present reality un-mediated to the viewer. But if the videos, in the limited period that they have now existed, have presented something to the viewer, then it is, on the contrary, a very critical question if and to what extent the images of music videos really do have the power to make a representation, to what extent music videos have any relationship with the events of reality, to what extent videos are able to portray these events.

So there is a certain paradox in the analysis and the reception of music videos. On the one hand the public, mainly a television public, is still conscious of the fact that the analogous images of the videos, like the images of photography, film and television, have a stupefying reality; the video-image, in the first place, is considered as a crude testimony to what takes place in our social reality. On the other hand the analogy, and also the related 'reality-effect', is pushed aside in the videos: although we are still heir to a classical conception of the image, as it has been developed in more than a hundred years history of the photographic

image, music videos are concerned with manipulation, with the transforming and reversing of the analogous image, with fundamentally violating the image with the utmost refined animation and computer technics.

The 'reality-effect' of the analogous image has always been one of the most important problems in the development of a theory of the image. Rudolf Arnheim, for example, in an early period of the cinema, was extremely conscious of the consequences of the refinement and the perfection of photographic reproduction: his project consisted of the fight against naturalistic aesthetics which was gradually perfected with the introduction of color, the wide screen and sound in film. In his writings Arnheim, being a theoretician of the silent movie, pointed up the imperfections, the 'failures' of film and photography. For if film wanted to preserve an artistic value, if film wanted to be art, the camera should not equal the human eye, but point up the differences. Arnheim drew up a repertoire of 'differential factors', which we should regard as a list of formal, cinematographic qualities, which do not cloud and obscure the medium, but emphasize it. These are qualities which - to use a more modern terminology - emphasize the functioning of film as a language and banish the natural from the image (like for example the reduction of depth in the image, the 'flattening' of the image, as Arnheim called it).

So, in television Arnheim might have been very disappointed. In television the 'reality-effect' is particularly highlighted, because in this medium there has been a true sovereignty of reality and not of the medium. Television 'is a means of cultural transportation. To be sure, it is a mere instrument of transmission, which does not offer new means for the artistic interpretation of reality',

such was the forecast of Arnheim in 1935.[1] The status of the image of television made it clear to Arnheim what the far-reaching consequences would be for modern culture: he expected a true cult of sensory stimulation, that is to say, a culture in which one would be caught by the 'dangerous illusion' that, by reason of the television image, perception is tantamount to conception. According to Arnheim, 'the more perfect our means of direct experience, the more easily we are caught by the dangerous illusion that perceiving is tantamount to knowing and understanding.'[2]

The 'reality-effect' of television, which is a real phenomenon in the attitude of the television public, can perhaps be described more adequately in the semiotic terminology used by Roland Barthes in his (early) analyses of the realistic effects of photography. Like 'realism' in photography, one can say that also television, as a medium which directly addresses the factual, continuously shows an emphatic existence of the world. What we have seen on television, must have really happened, that is our common sense idea. And the most authoritative moments in which this 'reality' is shown, are documentaries, and of course the daily news (which has become, in its form and rhythm, the embodiment of the 'reality-effect' on television).

Unlike photography, however, where according to Barthes the same 'astonishing evidence' of the event is being established, television does not uspply the <u>having-been-there</u> (ça a été) of the photographic referent. <u>Having-been-there</u>, that is where the photographic image inevitably must lead to, to the consciousness that it (the portrayed event or situation) indeed must have been like that. The photograph proves the existence of the referent.[3]

But television is in this respect even much more 'realistic'.

While photography always testifies to a captured and frozen moment, television liberates the image from its stillness and brings it into the dynamics of reality. This is why the having-been-there of the photographic referent is replaced in television by the being-there (être là). For television does not so much show a former existence, a past, as the photograph does so emphatically, but a decidedly present existence, a reality which is ours, a 'now'. This being-there finds its strongest expression in characteristic forms such as live broadcasts, which are said to belong to the essence of television.

Thus, when television leads us directly to the event, every mediating activity seems to be eliminated. The world on television is the world we know in our daily lifes, not a signified, coded, mediated world. Television offers us a transparent view of our reality. We think that, right through television so to speak, we observe not a sign of life, but life itself.

In this aspect, however, television corresponds to photography: their images are unmediated moments and fragments of real life, they are messages without a code. (That is why television cannot be identified with film, although, like film, it brings the photographic image to life. For in film there is always codification, even though it hides itself, in the cinematographic system, behind a mask of 'self-evidence' and 'naturalness', the paradoxical effect of precisely the functioning of the same code.[4])

The transparency of the image of television, the 'reality' of the portrayed events, is confirmed by the adaptation in forms specific to television. Reality, the continuous reality, seems to have submitted form and structure of television to its continuous movement.

Television does not know any beginnings or ends, no one moment can be indicated in which television, like film, can start and finish its performance. In the same way as reality, television exists and is simply there.

Television connects itself seamlessly to the continuity of real life, while film, according to Herbert Zettl, is essentially dependent on the medium: 'While film can reflect upon our world or pretend to being current, it is totally deterministic; the end of the story is fixed as soon as the reel is put on the projector. Live television, on the other hand, lives off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment very much the way we do in actual life.'[5] Forms of drama like the television-serial, the soap opera, confirm this 'reality-effect' of television. The regularity, the adjusted mise-en-scène, and, as is suggested many times, the 'open end' of every episode, a typical narrative indefiniteness, supply the medium with a continuity which totally conforms to the 'texture of daily life'.[6]

The reality of television is also confirmed by the immediateness of the highly discursive practices of the medium, in which the various 'talking heads' operate on television. Commentators, presenters, newsreaders, reporters and hosts, in many different figures a speaking institution presents itself on television, addresses itself directly to the spectator and creates with him or her a personal relationship between an 'I' and a 'you'. A relationship which, using Benvenistes terminology, establishes television as a discursive mechanism and its utterances as a discourse.[7] This is also a relationship which concerns the immediate time and space, that is to say, a 'here-and-now' (the title, of course, of a Dutch newscommentary program; we can learn a lot from the various titles of programs of this kind, which in many ways seem to confirm the

immediateness and transparency of the medium; other examples are Actua, Panoramic, Focus, etc.).[8]

This 'reality-effect' of television no longer corresponds to what, for the sake of convenience, we may call the 'new images', in which category we may include the images of music videos. Let me briefly repeat that I'm dealing here with a conception of music videos which does not justify all the different sorts of videos we see on television (or in discotheques, cafés), but which will only try to indicate a tendency. This is a conception which will range the videos on the side of a certain category of images, which - as we can evidently see in many videos - do not so much refer to an existing reality, a real model, a referent, but, as E. Ann Kaplan has already noted, in the first instance to themselves.[9]

The aesthetics of music videos does not strive to achieve a 'reality-effect'. They have undergone a rupture with all the traditional devices to represent our visible reality with the image. What is at stake in videos is not so much a representation, or the wish to make a representation, but merely a play with the images itself.

There are, of course, many videos which make references to the strategies and devices with which we used to portray real or fictional events, stories, characters. There are videos alluding to the classical Hollywood film, or to newsreels, television programs, commercials. There are videos quoting complete sequences from well-known films, or images of well-known persons, pictures that we have seen many times before. But in this 'quoting', in this second-hand practice of creating 'not original' messages, we do not find the same images as before. Their function has been completely changed. And so has

their relationship to reality (or to the model, the event that has to be portrayed - the 'pro-filmic scene'), and finally their relationship to the spectator.

Thus, videos have posed this problem: their material is made from images, from 'analogous signs', but they do not make the same representation we have always been analysing, in semiotics, in the case of the classical images of Hollywood films, or even of television. The reason for the absence of a representational act of the video-image has to do with the effacement of some important conditions the image needs to be able to make a representation of the world, and ultimately to signify the world.

The important thing is that for a representational act, reality, or a model from reality, isn't really necessary. The only thing that is required, as Roland Barthes once noted, is the 'dual foundation' of the sovereignty of the act of the découpage and the unity of the subject of that action.[10] These are the conditions of which one has to think while analysing representation in the arts: theatre, paintings, film, literature.

A découpage supposes a cut, the creating of sharp boundaries, barriers, divisions. Boundaries are necessary to create significations, because they express contradictions, they ignore everything that is outside and emphasize everything that is inside, as Barthes has said. It is in this respect that Barthes tried to unify Diderot, Brecht and Eisenstein: in their work he discovered a 'tableau'-quality, successive moments that are sharply divided, which he called, if they were 'aesthetically perfect', 'pregnant moments'. In the work of Brecht, for example, there are scenes which are laid out (in the sense in which one says the table is laid, as Barthes stri-

kingly explains), scenes which are 'firmly cut out, erecting a meaning, but manifesting the production of that meaning'.[11] (So it is significant that Brecht had contempt for indefinite theatres, such as open-air theatres.)

A representation also needs a subject, a foundation, a geometrical base, that is to say, the world has to be seen from a certain point of view. For the découpage, Barthes said, we need an original place. 'A fetishist subject is required to cut out the tableau.'[12] It is, for example, in this respect that scientific discourse desires to distinguish itself from literary discourse: it is a language which has the illusion of being 'objective', that is to say, to function without a subject. But this 'objectivity' of scientific discourse is an illusion itself. For every utterance, also utterances belonging to scientific discourse, supposes a subject, either directly (for example by using the first personal pronoun in the text), or indirectly. What can, perhaps, be banned is a person, but never the subject.[13]

Precisely these conditions have been effaced in the exposure of music videos. As we may consider them a postmodern phenomenon (like E. Ann Kaplan did), they certainly possess one of the two features Fredric Jameson had assigned to postmodern culture: they do not bother about traditional categories, definitions, distinctions, and they efface every boundary, every separation.[14] For Jameson however the main effacement takes place in the relation between high culture and mass or popular culture, in the way postmodernism incorporates fantasy novels, murder mysteries, commercials, cartoons, grade-B Hollywood films, etc. But this can only be an effect of the effacement of boundaries within the music videos itself.

This effacement is expressed by a great variety of themes, of subjects (which is too differentiated to refer to them as clichés). Sometimes the videos show us a simple performance, a recording of a concert or a studio-performance, as we have seen so many times in former pop-programs on television. But many videos ignore these traditional representations and go on amazing expeditions in indefinable surroundings, occult worlds, unrealistic locations, impassable caves and infinite universes. The characters in the videos sometimes remind us of people we know from daily life: street kids, ordinary-looking people. But at other moments we are confronted with strangely dressed up space creatures, with mysterious and masked elements who threaten the city night life (Laura Branigan), with hybrid creatures with human and animal characteristics (Duran Duran), and with savage hordes, dressed in rags, who have escaped from pre-history and have been placed in the surroundings of a modern city (Billy Idol).

This effacement of boundaries, which makes the video-themes elusive, is also the result of the applied technics of representation in the music videos: anything is possible. Animation, photography, video, film, all are acceptable, and preferably they are triumphantly mixed. Like the characters of the video Menage à trois for example, made by K-Ram, who are supplied with inserted faces that are drawn with animation technics. And the same is done with the famous Aha-video, in which the characters continuously change from one animated situation to another 'real' situation. In this 'wild play' with representation technics it is clear that the purpose is not to re-present some model or some situation. On the contrary, computer technics are able to show us many represented figures that don't exist at all! In a video of Mick Jagger there has been an attempt

to create a woman, with human features, but still imprecisely filled in, who acts with the singer in the video. In fact, we are already able to do better than that: with some computer programs one can create real-looking human beings without their pre-filmic existence. If the music videos are to show us this kind of non-existent characters, the conceptions of 'realism' and 'representation' will be separated for ever.

The videos, being indefinite texts, pose the question of what the status is of the spectator. Are the spectators of music videos to be considered subjects? Do they have a certain position in relation to the video-texts, comparable with that which we have analysed the past few years in the system of the film, and with more difficulty in television?

It seems that videos, in their indefiniteness, present themselves, not as texts (texts which suppose a subject and an act of signification), but as, what someone like Jean Baudrillard would call, objects. In their status as objects, videos, if we may follow the view of Baudrillard, establish a totally different relationship with their spectators. The spectator is no longer a foundation, the base of the geometric figure of the perspective, as Barthes has called it, but has to lose his subject-ness in favor of the object. The object, which has long been the opposite side of the omniscient human subject, and which has been the real object of human power, human acts, knowledge and desire. Baudrillard has made the surprising statement that in our modern society it is no longer the human subject who is the centre of power and knowledge, but this subject has finally disappeared, as he says, 'at the horizon of the object'.[15] With cases from scientific research Baudrillard tries to make clear what he means by

'the triumph of the object': today the position of the analytic subject has become uncertain; we must even totally reverse the supremacy: it is the analysed object which nowadays triumphs over the subject, purely by its position as a object.

With this view, in which the privileged position of the human subject is relativised, Baudrillard places himself in a debate which is currently of great importance. One position in this debate is that there is a slow reversal in the relationships between man and his surroundings, and that it is to be doubted whether man is still master of his own fate, master of nature. The human subject - and that is also the view of, for instance, Jean-François Lyotard - is nothing more than an invention of Rationalism, a character who was given the leading rôle in the theatre of modern thought.

But in our postmodern society this central position of the subject is in danger: on account of techno-scientific evolution there has been a change in the way we experience our surroundings. Paradoxically the sovereignty of the human subject over nature does not increase with the high developed technology, but it seems that, on the contrary, we are losing our control, our sovereignty over the world. Characteristic for this situation is, perhaps, the way we discuss nuclear armament: we feel victims, not of another human subject, not of an evil genius with malicious plans, but first and foremost of the massive armament itself. It looks as if human beings will not destroy themselves, but run the risk of being destroyed by technology, as many science fiction films and stories have already suggested. That is why the human subject, according to Baudrillard, is a permanent hostage of the technological system, who is continuously threatened. This is characteristic for the position of the subject

of today: he is no longer a master, but he is a hostage of the world, of a non-human system, of - and that is ultimately the leading character in the work of Jean Baudrillard - the object.

With these object-features one might say that the videos have lost some capacities that were necessary for classical films (or television programs) to function as texts (and also necessary for us, researchers, theoreticians, to analyse the videos as texts, the spectators as subjects, and their practices as a system). The very absence of a system, the difficulties we meet in trying to find a level of description in which our analysis should take place, and the problematic position of the spectator in relation to the videos, all this suggests that the research on audiovisual texts as it has grown during the last twenty or thirty years and in which it has been strongly influenced by structural linguistics and semiotics, is very hard to apply to the object of the music videos. One of the main features which should be considered is the representative power of the images of music videos, because it is precisely their representation and their relationship with the referent, the models from reality, which is problematized by the videos, in a way much more radically than film or television were able to do.

What is actually at stake in these videos is the rôle of reality. A reality which is established by the real world in such texts as the documentary film or in a more general way in television (news, commentary programs, documentaries, etc.), and by the profilmic scene in the fiction film or in television drama. This 'reality', and thus the possibility of referring to this 'reality', is vanishing more and more in videos. And this is mainly expressed in these videos in which the most innovative technics are prac-

tised - not all videos, but nevertheless these in which we may discover some specific characteristics.

One of these characteristics is the open manipulation of the iconic and analogous image of the videos. It is as if music videos do not aim to really show us some event or some situation, but as if what is actually represented must immediately be covered by the playful application of the technics of video and computer.

It is especially in France that some theoreticians are very conscious of the changed status of this kind of image and are trying to formulate a different view and another kind of criticism with respect to videos. These views are partly related to the discourse of philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Marc Guillaume and Jean Baudrillard, related also to the work of people like Paul Virilio, and other names we regularly come across in a magazine like Traverses[16]. The terms used in these discourses seem to contrast sharply with the conceptions of semiotics and structuralism. Nevertheless, they can be applied very well to many of the music videos we are confronted with.

A central notion in this view is the reversibility of all the certainties which have been considered necessary for the conception of the iconic and analogous image: represented space, perspective, shape, system, material and substance. What is important in the video-image is the overall uncertainty, the absence of perspective, the un-systematic, the decreasing rôle of space, the im-material. It is not a revelation (as Bazin would have said) which is established in the image, but rather a veil. A veil which makes everything shown in the image uncertain, leaving it in a state of suspense.

The video-image is itself uncertain and unsolvable. It is an

image which cannot be assigned a fixed and permanent form. Edmond Couchot's remarks on metamorphosis may be applied to the video-image: 'The exact concept of form - in the meaning of Gestalt - is replaced by a concept of transformation. The artist (read: the videomaker -ET) is more interested in what takes place between the forms than in the forms themselves, more in what they will become than in their durable situation. The image no longer adheres to the position of its model in the represented space of the perspective painting or of photography, or in the presented and appropriated space of postperspective figurative art; the image is no longer a metaphor (transport of the form of the model into its image); it is a metamorphosis, which does not pass from one form to another, but passes between two forms which are neither the original nor the final terms. The Image hybridized with Time. It no longer refers to the past on account of the representation, nor to the present on account of the presentation or the inclusion, but to a potential, floating time between certainty and probability.'[17] This state of metamorphosis of the video-image, is this not precisely what many music videos are trying to show us? One of the clearest examples is, perhaps, the remarkable video Cry, made by Kevin Godley and Lol Creme, in which we only see close-ups of transforming faces, faces in metamorphosis.....

If our task is to formulate a criticism of music videos, which is a necessary activity next to an analysis of the conditions of production, distribution and reception of videos, it seems that we should leave the conceptions which were dominant in the research of film and television in the last twenty years, and look for approaches which are more adapted to the videos, the objects of analysis. If

semiotics has tried to diminish the part of reality by emphasizing the concept of the sign and by establishing textual analysis, then music videos challenge us to forget reality altogether and to eliminate every representative activity which should refer to it.

Ernie Tee

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12. Ibid. p. 92.

13. cf. Roland Barthes, 'Science versus literature', in: James B. Hall, Barry Ulanov (ed.), Modern Culture and the Arts, pp. 230-237.

14. cf. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in: Hal Foster (ed.), Postmodern Culture (London and Sydney: Pluto Press 1985), pp. 111-125.

15. cf. Jean Baudrillard, Les Stratégies Fatales (Paris: Bernard Grasset 1983).

16. Traverses is published by the Centre Georges Pompidou/Centre de Création Industrielle; in its editorial board we find Huguette Briand-Le Bot, Jean Baudrillard, François Burkhardt, Michel de Certeau, Paolo Fabbri, Marc Guillaume, Gilbert Lascault, Marc Le Bot, Louis Marin, and sometimes guest-editor Paul Virilio.

17. Edmond Couchot, 'Hybridations', in Elie Théofilakis (ed.), Modernes et après. Les Immatériaux (Paris: Editions Autrement 1985), p.127.